SYNOPSIS

ON

The Thesis titled

RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY NATION-BUILDING: A CASE STUDY OF MYANMAR, SRI LANKA AND THAILAND

BY

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UNDER THE GUIDANCE OF

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NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDIES
JULY 2025

THE UNIVERSITY OF TRANS-DISCIPLINARY HEALTH SCIENCES AND TECHNOLOGY

Private University Established in Karnataka by ACT 35 of 2013
BENGALURU - 560064

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary world, religion has become a common subject of discussion. Especially since the 9/11 attacks, there have been numerous studies focusing on religion concerning violence and the State. This has also helped establish the role of religion as essential to understanding the nation and its national identity. Identity and nationalism are so closely linked that they are mutually dependent; both play a crucial role in the understanding of what comprises a nation. Therefore, the nation-building process is based on the knowledge of a nation shaped by the ideology of nationalism, whereby a nation-state uses it to define its boundaries. There are other factors of change, such as industrialisation, urbanisation, social movements, and political movements, that also impact the nation-building process. The process is also employed to gain legitimacy, mainly when power is concentrated in a specific majority group within a diverse nation-state. Whether in Europe or South Asia, this phenomenon has been noted in most countries worldwide over a long period.

In Asia, nation-building in most countries is still in its early stages, compared to Europe. Additionally, in most of these countries, the nation-building process is a direct outcome of the anticolonial struggle. Nationalist movements are byproducts of the anti-colonial struggles, as these movements question not only the lack of freedom and decision-making but also the lack of representation and inclusivity in aspects such as culture, ethnicity, religion, and other elements of the native population. Despite the ambition of an ideal nation-building based on inclusivity, representation of all, political stability and economic development, there has been a diversion over the period. It has been noted that in the case of many of these countries, due to several reasons, there has been a shift whereby a singular aspect has been given predominance over others. In many cases, the majority-based factor has been uplifted, leaving the minorities excluded and misrepresented. The result of this has been conflict, as well as the rise of parallel ethno-religious or linguistic nationalism.

Given this, it was intriguing to examine whether a single factor or ‘tool of homogenisation’ influences the nation-building process. If so, to what extent does it exert influence? Since religion has been a widely discussed topic, it remains one of the factors that shape a nation's identity and nationalism. Studying its role in nation-building was therefore essential. This formed the basis of the interest in this thesis.

Thus, to narrow down the focus of the study and enhance conceptual understanding, a comprehensive literature review was conducted. The review concentrated on both the broader

perspective and the analysis of case studies. As a result, it was decided to examine the role of religion through a comparative analysis of three case studies. The research gaps led to the selection of Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand. The prevalence of Theravada Buddhism as the majority religion, combined with the scarcity of specific studies on this topic, supported this choice. This also led to articulating the research objectives and questions.

Research Objectives

The thesis has the following objectives:

- To understand the concepts and theories that explain the role of religion in the nation-building process.

- To study various factors contributing to nation-building and to examine whether there is a correlation between these factors and religion within the context of Myanmar, Thailand, and Sri Lanka through a comparative analysis.

- To understand the role of religion in contemporary nation-building in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, considering that all three countries share the same faith and sect of Theravāda Buddhism.

- To analyse the role of identity and its impact on facilitating the role of religion in the nation-building process, given the correlation between identity and nationalism, as well as nationalism and nation-building.

- To understand the role of elites as facilitators of the role of religion in the nation-building process.

- To analyse the significance of religious radical groups and their influence on the role of religion in the process.

Research Questions

- What are the factors that contribute to the nation-building process?
- Is there any correlation between the concepts of nation, nationalism, and nation-building?
- What has been the role of religion in the nation-building process in post-colonial countries?
- Does colonial history influence the nation-building processes in post-colonial countries, especially in the three case studies?
- Are there political and social historical similarities and differences among these three case studies?
- Who are the different actors, and to what extent do they influence the role of religion in the nation-building process?
- Are there similarities and differences among the factors and their roles in the three case studies?
- Does religion play a primary role among these factors in these cases?
- How do narrative, perception, histories, and religious chronicles impact the nation-building process in these countries?
- And how does this interplay with the role of religion? Does the role of religion in nation-building influence intra-state conflicts and violence in these countries?

Research Methodology

Based on the existing research gaps, this knowledge helped shape the research goal and hypothesis. However, there was a need to develop a set of questions and objectives, ensure systematic data collection and analysis, and structure the entire thesis to either prove or disprove the hypothesis. The research methodology served as a tool for achieving all these aims.

- *Qualitative research:* This study employed a qualitative approach exclusively, focusing on the analysis and interpretation of concepts. The research also aimed to understand the nation-building process and the factors influencing it by closely examining the implications of political and social history. It relies on primary data, including historical

books, archival materials, interviews, and speeches, all sourced from publicly available sources. Additionally, the study used government data from official websites, particularly archival censuses, constitutions, policies, education curricula, and plans. The secondary data comprises essays and papers on similar topics, as well as interviews conducted by other researchers that have been published and properly credited. The research was challenged by language barriers, especially in Myanmar and Thailand. In Sri Lanka, most of the available data was also in English. Another obstacle was the impact of the pandemic. Due to mobility restrictions and political and economic upheavals—such as a coup in Myanmar, a financial crisis, political protests in Sri Lanka, and student protests in Thailand—field-based research was not feasible. A brief field visit was nonetheless carried out in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in October 2019. However, plans for further fieldwork were abandoned due to travel restrictions.

- *Exploratory Research:* This study employs an exploratory research method, as there is no fixed set of problems, and much is based on generalised facts. This approach has helped to focus on the issue and narrow the study to the core problems. The method is also flexible, allowing the research to take different directions based on new information provided through the data.
- *Comparative Analysis Method:* The comparative method has facilitated comparisons among three case studies: Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. This has helped in understanding the similarities and differences among the case studies, primarily through a historical lens. The comparative analysis of the case studies allows narrowing down the variables that impact and influence the role of religion in the nation-building process, as well as understanding other contributing factors. This has helped address the question of whether religion plays a pivotal role in the nation-building process in the cases of the three countries.
- *Critical Historical Method:* The historical research method proved to be a vital tool in this study, as it facilitated an understanding of primary and secondary materials within their historical, social, and cultural contexts. One challenge has been remaining very cautious of biases; this method assists in grasping subtle nuances, representations, or the absence of information. Another factor that supported the research, especially in the case of studying Sri Lankan cases, was the availability of histories written by historians from minority communities in English. This has impeded progress in Myanmar and Thailand (except for the extensive work of the Pattani region); there is a lack of minority

histories written by historians from the same communities, or if some exist, they are in ethnic languages. Nevertheless, the scarcity of data or history has also helped shape the understanding and variables in this research. Given the use of this method, extensive archival data collection was carried out at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (one month each in May 2019 and March 2023), Central Library and International Departmental Library, Jadavpur University (for two weeks in August 2021), and the National Library, Kolkata (for two weeks in September 2021). Furthermore, several reading materials and newspaper archives were gathered during a two-week visit to Colombo, Sri Lanka, in October 2019.

Chapters

The thesis consists of six chapters, followed by a conclusion.

- *Introduction:* The first chapter introduces the research subject and its objective. This section elaborates on the research's motivation and the issues addressed by this study. The introduction also outlines the context and the significance of this research in modern times.
- *Religion and Nation-building: Frameworks, Theories, and Concepts*: The second chapter focuses on the concepts of nation, nationalism, and nation-building. It establishes the connections between these three and also explores the role of history and identity as shared factors. As demonstrated through various elements, particularly the influence of elites and identity, religion plays a part in the nation-building process. The second section of this chapter examines the theories of both topics in detail and explains their relationship with the case studies. Theories of elites and identity, and their correlations with the understanding of the nation and the shaping of nationalism, are emphasised. This aspect is significant given its role in helping to understand why and how elites and identity influence the role of religion in the nation-building process. The third and final section focuses on the detailed methodological tools, their relevance, and their impact on understanding each case study, as well as the similarities and differences among the three.
- *Nation-building in Myanmar: Religion, Military, and the Radicals*. The third chapter primarily focuses on the role of religion in Myanmar's nation-building process. The first section highlights the differences in understanding of the nation among the different communities in Myanmar. It also emphasises the impact of colonial policies on

aggravating the ethno-religious divisions existing in the country. The Bamar-Buddhist nationalism is a product of the anti-colonial movement in the country. The role of the monks protesting against the British administrators and the Western-educated Thakins in shaping the majority-centric nationalism within the country also explains why ethnicity and religion became the predominant factors in the nationalism. This had an impact on the nation-building process in Myanmar, which is facilitated by the involvement of both the political and non-political elites.

- *Nation-building in Sri Lanka: Movements, Divides, Religions, and Politics*: The fourth chapter examines the impact of colonial policies in widening divisions among the ethno-religious and linguistic groups in Sri Lanka. Similar to Myanmar, Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism emerged from an anti-colonial movement that was directed against Christian missionaries and their schools, rather than against the administrators. Thus, religion has remained a pivotal factor of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism from the beginning. Since independence, the role of religious nationalists in the country's politics and State policies has made minorities feel excluded from the process of nation-building. This has led to the rise of parallel nationalism and has also encouraged ethnic conflicts.
- *Nation-building in Thailand: The Military, Monarchy, and Religion.* The fifth chapter focuses on the same hypothesis. In Thailand, both the monarchy and the military play a dominant role. Although, unlike Sri Lanka and Myanmar, Thailand has not been colonised, there has been a strong influence of external powers on the understanding of the nation and Thai nationalism. Elites play a primary role in shaping nationalism and thus influence the nation-building process. In Thailand, the elites have used religion to legitimise their position, and they play the primary role in shaping nationalism, thereby influencing the nation-building process. In Thailand, the elites have used religion to legitimate and consolidate their power and thus have retained control over it. Although religion has always been at the core of Thai nationalism and a factor in the nation-building process, language and culture play a pivotal role. This is unique to Thailand among the case studies and is also one of the primary findings of this study.
- *Conclusion:* This chapter concentrates on the results of the comparative analysis of the three case studies. It highlights the findings from each case study. It draws parallels and contrasts between Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand, focusing on the role of religion in each country's nation-building process, using standard variables.

Broad Conclusions on the three case studies

- This research focused on studying the role of religion in the nation-building process. In the case of these three countries, the role of religion is intricately woven into the understanding of the nation due to its influence on the majority-centric nationalism. Religion also became a significant tool for gaining allegiance, consolidating power, and exerting control. These reasons led to the establishment of religion as a pivotal force in the nation-building in Myanmar and Sri Lanka. In the case of Thailand, given the role of culture and language, they play an equally important role in nation-building as religion.

- In the case of Sri Lanka and Myanmar, majority-centric nationalism arose from the anti-colonial movement. The role of monks as primary instigators, combined with the limited dissemination of Western elites' secular ideas among the masses, contributed to the development of ethno-religious nationalism. Independence in 1948 for these countries sparked the emergence of political parties influenced by the same nationalism. Consequently, this majority-centric nationalism had a direct impact on the nascent nation-building process. In Thailand, Thai nationalism was shaped by the monarchs and later the military. In both countries, religion—specifically Buddhism—remained a central element. However, as emphasis was also placed on culture and language, these factors gradually gained importance comparable to religion. As with the other two nations, nationalism as an ideology influenced Thailand’s nation-building process.

- Elites, both political and non-political, played a role in emphasising the importance of religion in the nation-building process. In Thailand, hierarchy and the need to maintain one's stature are ingrained in the system. Therefore, it was essential for monarchs and the military to use religion as a tool to gain allegiance and consolidate power. The shift to new elites and the rise of the middle class led to an emphasis on language and culture for consolidation. These two factors, along with religion, played a significant role in Thailand’s nation-building process. The role of nationalists in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, particularly religious nationalists, had a significant impact on positioning religion within the nation-building process. In both Sri Lanka and Myanmar, religion was utilised by elites to gain allegiance. Non-political elites, such as radical monks and groups, furthered this cause.

- History and narratives play a vital role in all three countries. These narratives are part of the dominant nationalism and also act as a catalyst to elevate religion as the core of this nationalism, thereby influencing the nation-building process. As outlined in the conceptual chapter, nationalism and history are closely intertwined, as evident in these three case studies. In Thailand, history has been reconstructed and rewritten to emphasise the supremacy of the monarchs. Similarly, narratives and understandings of history based on myths have fostered the Sinhalese belief that they are the original inhabitants of the island, while other communities are outsiders. In Myanmar, the narrative and history have also been used to enforce homogenisation through education as a tool. The history and narrative in all these countries have led to an understanding of 'others' and the creation of a 'us versus them' mentality. This process of othering has a substantial impact on the development of parallel nationalism and intra-conflicts in each of these countries. It also raises questions about the nation-building process, as perceptions of what constitutes a nation differ among various groups in these countries.

- Similar to history and nationalism, identity and nationalism are also closely intertwined. One depends on the other; therefore, the understanding of nationalism based on majority ethnicity, religion, and language significantly influences the identity formation of individuals from the majority group as well as minorities and the marginalised. The conflicts in these countries are both a consequence and a cause of identity shifts. It is the lack of recognition, sense of belonging, and inclusivity that has led to the rise of parallel nationalism in these countries.

- Although colonial policies did not create the divide, they played a significant role in worsening it. The divide-and-rule policies, favouring one group over another, did have an impact. These policies influenced the shaping of majority nationalism in Sri Lanka and Myanmar. However, it was the failure of the elites and their role as facilitators of the majority religion in the nation-building process that led to the solidification of these divides. The lack of inclusivity of minorities in all three countries has been evident through the ethno-religious conflicts. In the case of Thailand, although it was not colonised, the neighbouring colonial powers had a considerable influence on shaping the understanding of nation and nationalism. In all three countries, their notions of

nation, race, and ethnicity were borrowed from the West and influenced by colonial powers.